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# The Crisis Coup

## *ABC's Coverage of the TWA Hijacking*

As the Israeli army prepared to withdraw most of its troops from Lebanon last January, it moved 121 prisoners from the Ansar detention camp in south Lebanon across the border into Israel and held them at Atlit prison near Haifa. The Western media for the most part ignored the transfer, although it violated the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

Three months later, on April 2, Israel closed the Ansar camp and took its remaining 1,015 detainees to Israel. The United States government condemned the transfer of the second group of prisoners, but, again, American press coverage of the move was not extensive.

Seventeen days later, Israel released 249 of the men. Amnesty International, the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights and many Lebanese demanded the return of the remaining 766. Israeli officials did not say whether or when they would be set free. But still, the story did not receive world press attention.

It was probably at about this time that a group of Lebanese Shiites made plans to hijack TWA flight 847, which left Athens for Rome on Friday, June 14.

ABC News, like the other American television networks, began to cover the story almost as soon as the hijack began. Micky Gurdus, who monitors Middle East radio communications for ABC in Tel Aviv, alerted the Tel Aviv bureau that the flight had changed course and was on its

way to Beirut. Gurdus recorded the voice of Captain John Tetrake as he pleaded for permission to land in Beirut. He touched down at 11:55 a.m., and the story of the hijacking of TWA flight 847 had begun. It would end 17 days later with one young American dead.

Only a few American journalists were in Beirut to see the first of the hijacked plane's three landings there. There were two young American free-lancers, both stringing for non-American companies: Maggie Fox for the Canadian Broadcasting Co. and Liz Sly for the *Sunday Times* of London. A few American organizations had excellent non-American stringers, such as Julie Flint, who is British, for ABC News, Nora Boustany, a Lebanese, for the *Washington Post* and Ihsan Hijazi,

also a Lebanese, for the *New York Times*.

American news agencies had a variety of reasons for not keeping American staffers in Beirut: News interest in Lebanon had diminished sharply following the withdrawal of U.S. Marines in February 1984; the kidnapping of Associated Press bureau chief Terry Anderson on March 16, 1985, had created concern for the safety of American correspondents; and the State Department was advising news organizations, including the *New York Times* and *Time*, not to send correspondents to Beirut. No American journalists went to Lebanon on the first day of the hijacking for another reason: Two other airplanes had been hijacked to Beirut in the previous week. Both incidents ended quickly, without loss of life. The blown up hull of the first plane, a Jordanian airliner, still lay on the tarmac in Beirut when Captain Tetrake landed.

On that hot Friday afternoon in Beirut, the hijackers issued their demands: Israel's release of the 766 detainees from Atlit prison and the release of Shiite Muslims facing murder charges in Kuwait and Spain. The hijackers said that if their demands were not met they would blow up the plane, killing everyone on board. They then ordered Captain Tetrake to take the aircraft to Algiers, where Algerian negotiators, U.S. diplomats and a large contingent of the world's press were waiting for them.

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It was clear they had not been trying to kill us; if they had been, we would be dead. Ten years of war, including the frequent shelling of their neighborhood, as well as reports that the CIA was responsible for a car bomb that killed 80 people nearby earlier this year, make the Lebanese tense.)

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